

Tuesday

Tuesday starts much the same way as Monday did. After spending another night in Bethany, Jesus again walks back to Jerusalem and goes to the temple. Jesus taught a LOT today, but it is possible that some of the teachings mentioned this day could have happened Wednesday. After all, Luke says of this week that, *“Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each evening he went out to spend the night on the hill called Mount of Olives [near Bethany], and all the people came early in the morning to hear him at the temple.”* (Luke 21:37-38). Interestingly, none of the gospels specify what happened on Wednesday. So, since there is so much to get through, we will look at some of Jesus’ teachings in the temple today, and leave some for tomorrow.

The first thing that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe Tuesday morning at the temple, is that Jesus is interrogated by the chief priests, teachers of the law, and the elders. Since their attempts to plot Jesus’ death have so far been thwarted by the admiring crowds, their best plan for today was to gather together in a large group, and ask Jesus a question: *“Tell us by what authority you are doing these things? Who gave you this authority?”*

Jesus responds by saying he will answer their question if they answer his first. Jesus asks, *“John’s baptism – was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!”*

The large group of leaders huddles up, discussing it amongst themselves. They worry if they say John’s baptism was from heaven, that Jesus will ask them why they didn’t believe him. If they answer that it was from men, Jesus’ crowd could attack them in some way, because the crowd believed John was a prophet. So... they simply answer, *“We don’t know.”* Jesus then refuses to answer their question about where his authority comes from.

Since 3 gospel writers record this interaction in very striking similarity, it seems important to look for what was significant about it. I suspect that that the significance surrounds Jesus’ authority. Authority has been discussed many times over the course of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus’ ministry begins with him refusing an offer of authority that would be given from Satan, when he was tempted in the desert for 40 days. We see often in the gospels, that Jesus taught with authority, in a way that amazed people, and that was unlike the teaching of the scribes. Jesus is described as having authority over unclean spirits, and authority to forgive sins. Just yesterday, Jesus kicked the livestock sellers and money changers out of the temple- that took authority.

Also, if we go back to John 7 and 8, we realize that Jesus has had a long conversation about this before, in the same place- in the temple, with at least some of the same people. In this instance, Jesus argued that his testimony was valid because it came from God the Father. He claimed that the Jews did not know God, his Father, but that his authority and teaching came from him. The Pharisees were so outraged by Jesus’ claim to God-given authority, that they tell

the temple guards to go arrest Jesus. In a comical scene, the temple guards end up being captivated by Jesus' teachings, and merely listen to him. Eventually, they go back to the Pharisees without Jesus, causing them to burst out angrily, "*You mean he has deceived you also*" (John 7:47)? It seems that today, Jesus doesn't answer their question partly because he already has, and partly to frustrate their hopes that Jesus will give them an answer that creates an excuse for them to arrest him. Today is not that day.

Next, we see that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all follow up the interrogation with Jesus telling the Parable of the Tenants. I wondered why all 3 gospel writers felt the need to include this parable, but I think it might be tied to the question about authority. Jesus actually answers the question about authority in this parable, but the teachers are too distracted by their anger to see it. The parable tells of a vineyard owner renting his vineyard to some tenants. (The vineyard owner represents God, and the tenants represent the Jews.) When the harvest is ready, the owner requests a rental payment of a portion of the harvest, but the tenants repeatedly refuse, beating up the servants (who represent the prophets) who were to collect the harvest. The owner finally sends his son (who represents Jesus), thinking they will respect him, but instead, the tenants kill the son. The parable ends with the owner arriving and putting the tenants to death, and giving the vineyard to others.

I see two important things in this parable. One is that Jesus answers the question of authority by putting himself into the parable as the son of the owner, which would mean his authority comes from being the son of God. The other thing is that Jesus predicts both his death, and the destruction of Jerusalem in this parable- and the people in the crowd gasp, "*May this never be!*" Yet, despite the warning from this parable that killing the son will doom them and their city to destruction; despite the fact that they hope the tragic ending of this parable will never be, they will turn on him and kill him just as Jesus predicts in this parable, in three short days.

Jesus continues teaching urgently all day, as if he is trying to cram as much information into the minds and hearts of the crowd as he possibly could. He talks about taxes, weddings and marriage, and who the Messiah is. He honors a widow who gave a few pennies to the temple treasury, and commends her over the rich who can give plenty, but sacrifice little.

One of the goals in all he does, as we saw in the clearing of the temple yesterday and the parable from today, is to expose the sins of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. I mentioned the Seven Woes discourse yesterday, and it takes up a whole chapter in Matthew 23. Here at the temple on Tuesday afternoon, Jesus once and for all calls out the teachers and Pharisees for using their positions of power for evil. Over the last few hundred years, the Jewish teachers had developed a set of strict rules that governed daily life for the people of Israel, called the "traditions of the elders." These rules and regulations came from interpretations of the law of Moses, but mostly these were a long list of rules made by men, not God. These extra

rules are what Jesus is referring to when he says, *“They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them”* (Matt 23:4).

During the discourse, Jesus repeatedly says the words, *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!”* Each woe is followed by examples that prove their hypocrisy and mistreatment of Jewish believers. Why seven times? Seven is the number of completeness, so Matthew, being a numbers person, is showing that Jesus condemned the Pharisees and teachers completely. These words are hard to read, and seem shockingly aggressive compared to Jesus’ usual treatment of people caught in sin. He was known to eat dinner with sinners and tax collectors. He was known to offer forgiveness without condemnation or punishment, and merely ask the person to leave their life of sin and go in peace. Why is he so harsh to teachers and Pharisees, when he has shown compassion to many others whose sins he forgave?

Could there be a connection to the way Jesus cleared the temple yesterday to the way he treats the teachers today? I’m sure Jesus would have been against the money-changers or sellers of livestock taking advantage of people by overcharging or price-gouging. However, his main problem with them was not their greed, but of the placement of their shops inside God’s temple courts. Had they been buying and selling outside the temple, I’m not sure Jesus would have overturned their tables. In the same way, the teachers of the law and Pharisees were not just pridefully oppressing people in their businesses or families, but they were doing this inside the temple. They were turning God’s good and precious law into a heavy burden, extracting money, devotion, and service out of God’s people that benefited them. They taught their followers that external obedience to God’s law was what saved, ignoring the heart of God’s law, as Jesus pointed out in the Sermon on the Mount. They have accepted the great responsibility of teaching God’s law to the people, and used their position for personal gain, and in the process, had lead believers astray. Jesus says, *“You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are”* (Matt 23:15).

These are harsh words, but it shows how zealous God is about the abuse of authority when it is directed at his people. I see two amazing, encouraging truths that come out of this. One is that this means when we personally face oppression and injustice from people who say they are serving God, that we know that God’s righteous anger will be kindled. To know that those who oppress and lead astray believers will one day face justice is an amazing comfort when we face difficult situations like this in the church. God is not vaguely keeping one eye on the church and letting the injustice slip past his notice. No, he sees it, and is saving up a special level of wrath for people who misuse their spiritual authority in God’s house. These words of Jesus show that he is our advocate today, just as strongly as he was an advocate for the oppressed believers in that day.

The other encouragement I see is a little more complicated. It's that this passage encourages the healthy practice of self-examination. After reading Jesus' condemning language to the Pharisees, we may feel pricks of fear, wondering if we too might in some ways be like them and come under God's wrath. This is good news because it means we are actually not like the Pharisees, who were unwilling to do any sort of self-examination. They were so blinded by power and pride, that no amount of condemning language from Jesus could cause them to even consider if his words could be true. Safety from God's wrath is found in this very practice of considering that there could be sin hiding in our hearts, searching for it, and repenting of it. Jesus' kind and gentle treatment of repentant sinners, like Matthew, who was previously an unjust tax collector, shows us that asking if we are like the Pharisee's is the safest place to be. On the other hand, if we read these words and are tempted to say, "Thank goodness I'm not like that!" we should pause and consider these words from Luke 18:10-14:

"He [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.'"

Jesus is a humble king, in search of a humble people. We saw that when he humbly rode into the city on a donkey's colt, and now we see it in his zealous clearing of the temple and attacking the Pharisee's pride. Even more examples of Jesus' humble heart are coming, as this week goes on. But today, let's celebrate Jesus' willingness to be gentle and merciful towards us, his children, but at the same time, be strong and courageous to stand up to the oppressors in our lives. We started today by looking at where Jesus' authority comes from. His authority comes directly from God, giving him the highest level of power given to any man who ever lived on this earth. Yet he used that power and authority not for selfish gain, not for prestige or wealth, but he used it to set us free from our oppressors, namely sin and death.

Extra Reading: Matt 21:23-23:39, Mark 11:27-12:44, Luke 20:1-21:4